1 Europe, Alterity and Fear in French Classical Drama: Past Plots and Contemporary Controversies

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Concepts of Europe are explicitly treated in several French classical dramas of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. European issues are also raised implicitly when non-European cultures are depicted in ways which imply a contrast with European culture. Of particular interest are twentieth-century responses to these plays, which reveal current European preoccupations with alterity or fear or both.

Richelieu's Europe

Europe by Jean Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin is an exceptional play inspired by an exceptional politician, Cardinal Richelieu. The theme is French fear of Spain dominating Europe. The play advocates France playing a leading role in protecting Europe from domination by a single power. This was the constant policy of Richelieu in the years he was the chief minister of King Louis XIII of France between 1624 and 1642. Richelieu's European policy was aimed at mitigating the disastrous effects of religious and political violence occasioned by a savage European conflict, namely the Thirty Years War of 1618 to 1648. *Europe* is the only French classical drama to deal with the affairs of several European states in relation to the concept of Europe as a whole. It was only performed once, on 18 November 1642. Richelieu died shortly afterwards, but the play was published in several editions. It was revived in 1954 at a time when Hitler's attempt to dominate Europe was a recent and terrifying memory.

The engraved frontispiece of Desmarets's *Europe* shows the six chief characters of the play (Fig. 1). One is a personification of

Fig. 1: The engraved frontispiece of Jean Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin's play *Europe*, Paris, Henry Le Gras, 1643.

Europe itself. The others are personifications of those territories most relevant to Richelieu's concerns. Spain (Ibère) stands stiffly as a Spanish grandee in tall hat, huge ruff and mustachios holding out chains to Europe, who is a female figure with triple crown on her head. Europe is turning to France (Francion) a valiant knight, who is unsheathing his sword to protect her from enslavement to Spain. In the background are Germanique representing the Holy Roman Empire supporting Spain, whilst Italy (Ausonie) takes the French side by holding a hand under Europe's arm as Europe fends off the chains of Spain. The sixth figure represents the Duchy of Lorraine (Austrasie) who is forming a secret alliance with Spain. She places a hand on the Spanish grandee's thigh whilst holding a finger to her own mouth to signal to the spectator not to reveal her devious political manoeuvres.

The action of the play revolves around a love intrigue which is an allegorical representation of Richelieu's diplomatic alliances. The Cardinal strove to obstruct Spain's communications with Flanders in northern Europe. For the king of Spain, control of the route from Spain to the Spanish Netherlands via Milan, the Alpine passes and Lorraine was a lifeline. For Richelieu and France it represented encirclement by the hostile power of the Habsburg dynasty, namely the king of Spain allied with his cousin, the Holy Roman Emperor.

These political issues are translated into the love intrigue of the play. Europe rejects all suitors for marriage, indicating that she will not be enslaved to any single power. Francion (France) respects Europe's desire for freedom, yet strives to serve her as a chivalrous knight without hope of reward. Ibère (Spain) however, courts Europe, hoping to marry and control her; but being rejected turns his attentions to Ausone (Italy) Europe's confidant. This represents Spanish ambitions to control Mantua and Montferrat in north Italy for greater control of the routes to the Alpine passes, which were a key element for communication between Spain and the Netherlands. Ibère fails to win Ausonie, so woos Austrasie (Lorraine) instead. The amorous vacillations of Austrasie represent the political vacillations of Lorraine in successive alli-

ances with Spain and France, but finally she comes out on the side of Francion (France). The last two acts of the play are more specific about political events. In Act IV Scene 4 Francion boasts that when the Catalans rebelled in 1640 against the king of Spain for infringing their traditional liberties, it was to France they turned for protection, and accepted King Louis XIII as Count of Barcelona. For Spain the loss of the port of Barcelona complicated communications by sea to north Italy. In the play, Ibère's final humiliation is the defection of Germanique who, preferring rational policy to family ties, turns against the Spaniard in the last two scenes of Act V. This represents the peace treaty concluded in 1641 between the Holy Roman Emperor and France. The play concludes with Europe rejoicing in peace and freedom.

In his analysis of the play, Najam suggests that fear of tyranny and hope for peace in Europe is a reason why Desmarets's drama was revived in Paris in 1954 by an amateur drama group, a decade after the end of World War II:

> The tone of *Europe* is aggressive. There is in it a spirit which the France of today needs as it faces the problem of lasting peace in Europe and the world. [...] It is to be noted that if the reader substitutes Germany for Spain in most of this work, the selection of this play by this amateur group seems timely. A large segment of the French population is understandably *apprehensive* [my emphasis] of a revived German national army. Though a European Defence Community has been proposed and a treaty was signed in May, 1952, ratification of the Treaty by the French parliament has not followed. (Najam 1956: 26)

The analogy Najam sketches between French fears of Spanish tyranny in the seventeenth century, and fears of German rearmament in the mid-twentieth century is obviously inexact, but in his view sufficient to suggest that the play was timely. Lack of precise correlation is no bar to reading contemporary European concerns back into French classical dramas.

Desmarets's *Europe* is a unique play for its detailed focus on relations between various states of Western Europe. Most frequently the word «Europe» in seventeenth-century French classical drama

is juxtaposed with other continents to convey the idea of great territorial extent, as in «I cause fear over all Asia and Europe» («Je tiens toute l'Asie et l'Europe en alarmes») (Corneille, *Suréna*, III. 1, 769). For French classical dramatists the imagined Asia referred primarily to the province of the Roman Empire called Asia Minor, which is now Turkey, and also to the lands now called the Middle East. Asia was especially associated with the Ottoman Empire.

Alterity

The Muslim Turks of the Ottoman Empire definitely represented alterity to Christian Europe. But whether they generated fear depended on where in Europe they were viewed from. The Ottoman Empire and associated Muslim states encircled the southern and eastern Mediterranean, extending Muslim rule over lands in Africa, Asia and Europe. It embraced the territories now called Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Greece, the Balkans, and Hungary. The Ottoman Turks were definitely to be feared by the Christian peoples of the Habsburg Empire, especially in 1683 when they besieged Vienna. However, they were defeated, and thereafter the threat diminished. For France, however, any enemy of the Habsburgs was a potential friend. The Ottomans became valued trading partners, and so keen was King Louis XIV to be on friendly terms with the Muslim Empire to the East that he was satirized as the «Grand Turk» of Versailles, a play of words on the title Grand Turk, which was a common European designation for the Ottoman sultan. For ordinary French people alterity lurked on the seas between France and North Africa, where Muslim pirates lay in wait for Christian seafarers, hoping to capture them for enslavement or ransom. Capture by Turks at sea became a literary commonplace, and is used light-heartedly in French comedy by Molière in *L'Étourdi* and *Les Fourberies de Scapin*.

The visit of the Ottoman ambassador to the court of Louis XIV in 1669 inspired the most famous representation of Muslim Turks in French comedy. Molière wrote *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670) to

ridicule the social pretensions of the bourgeoisie in the person of Monsieur Jourdain. Molière exploits the topical interest in Turkish affairs by climaxing his play with a scene which makes fun of Turkish culture in general. He also makes fun of the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an. Monsieur Jourdain is tricked into submitting to a ceremony to become a Muslim so that his daughter can marry the supposed son of the Ottoman sultan. Characters pretending to be Turks gabble unintelligible words. There is a parody of the invocation to Allah. A copy of the Qur'an is brought by dervishes with candles in their bonnets, and placed on Jourdain's back for the mufti to read from.

This comic initiation scene signalled to Molière's seventeenth-century audience the alterity of Islam contrasted with Christian Europe. However, a preview of Colette Roumanoff's production of this play to be performed in December 2010, says that the scene which mocks Muslims will be performed as «a ceremony in music and almost without words so that it retains its cheerful and entertaining character». The reason given is: «Turks today are near neighbours who are going to join Europe, whilst for Molière they were practically inhabitants of another planet. No question therefore of ridiculing Islam even in fun» (Roumanoff 2010). The politics of the European Union today influence the staging of a French classical comedy.

The Ottoman embassy also prompted Racine to write his tragedy *Bajazet* (1672). His subject was a recent incident in Ottoman history concerning the attempt by Bajazet to supplant his elder brother as sultan. This had occurred in 1635. It was extremely unusual for a French classical tragedy to be written about near contemporary history. The tragic genre required that the subjects should have great dignity. This was normally achieved by setting the tragedy in ancient times. In his preface Racine justified his modern subject thus:

> The distance of countries [like the Ottoman Empire] makes up for the proximity in time, because people do not see much difference between what is a thousand years away and what is a thousand miles away. [...]

> We have so few dealings with the princes and other people who live in the seraglio that we view them, so to speak, as people who live in another century to our own. (Racine 1999: 625)

One has the impression that for Racine the alterity of the Muslim Turks is determined by their great distance from the heartlands of Europe.

Voltaire and Europe

Voltaire was a man of the theatre, who wrote twenty-six tragedies and eighteen comedies. The best of these rank as the greatest achievements of French classical drama in the eighteenth century. He was also a man of Europe in the sense that his name was well known throughout the continent. French editions of his plays circulated widely and were translated into many European languages as a vehicle for spreading Enlightenment ideas. Voltaire also conducted a copious correspondence with over 1,500 individuals, including crowned heads, notably King Frederick II of Prussia and Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia. For young Englishmen and their tutors on the Grand Tour, a visit to Voltaire at Ferney was a memorable occasion. Such events were carefully stage-managed by this European celebrity (Brewer 2009: 207–208).

Europe as a mental construct figures in several plays by Voltaire. A general indication of what the term meant for him can be found in the second chapter of his *Siècle de Louis XIV* (1752). He saw Christian Europe as a great republic of several states, united by a common basis of religion, even though divided into several sects. He adds that these European states all share «the same principles of public law and political ideas, which are unknown in the other parts of the world» (1957: 620). He then surveys the states of Europe under the following headings: Germany, Spain, Portugal, the United Provinces (present-day Netherlands), England (with a mention of Scotland), Rome, the rest of Italy (Venice, Tuscany, Savoy and the Swiss), the northern States (Poland, Sweden, Denmark and Muscovy) and finally a section on the Turks who occupied Hungary,

the Balkans, Greece and the Greek islands including Crete. Implied in this survey of «the situation, forces and interests of the principal European nations at the death of Louis XIII King of France» (1957: 650) is Voltaire's view of Europe as co-terminous with Christendom. He sees the European parts of the Ottoman Empire as European lands subject to military occupation by Muslim Turks.

Exporting European Values

The term «European values» —like «British values» or «French values»— may be a powerful political slogan, but remains an elusive concept. McCormick has summarized the tentative results of the European Values Study and the World Values Survey initiated in the 1980s and 1990s respectively. He concludes: «The problem for Europeans is not so much a lack of common values, as a failure to acknowledge and understand those values» (2010: 85). Here the term will be used as a heuristic device to examine three plays which suggest what the concept of «European values» might have meant to French classical dramatists, and how they might have wished their audiences to respond to it. In each case a single European country, France or Spain, is taken to be representative of Europe as a whole, in the sense that French or Spanish characters are called Europeans by the non-European characters in the plays. The plays raise questions concerning the means by which values deemed to be Christian, European or universal may be legitimately communicated by Europeans to the inhabitants of other continents. Two of Voltaire's plays, *Zaïre* and *Alzire,* examine how Europeans had attempted to export the values of Christian Europe to other continents. The third play, *La Veuve du Malabar*, by Antoine-Marin Lemierre, examines the exportation of Enlightenment values to Hindus in India. In each case the Europeans and non-Europeans stand in a relationship of alterity to each other, and their relationship is characterized by violence and fear.

In *Zaïre* (1732) Voltaire considers the Crusades, a long series of military operations by Europeans to recapture those Middle East-

ern lands which had been under Muslim control for four hundred years. The Crusades were European ventures in the sense that leaders and soldiers from all parts of Europe took part. Christians captured Jerusalem in 1099, a striking initial success. Salah-ad-Din recaptured Jerusalem in 1187. Never again was it to be a city under Christian rule.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) offered the crusaders special guidance: «The Christian glories in the death of a pagan because Christ is glorified» («In morte pagani christianus gloriatur, quia Christus glorificatur»; Migne 1854: 924a). Such sentiments are congruent with the values of the chief Christian characters portrayed by Voltaire in *Zaïre*, the action of which is set in Jerusalem. Voltaire chose the Seventh Crusade of 1249 as the historical moment. It was an appropriate choice for his French audience, as this Crusade was led by King Louis IX of France, later made a saint. It was also a disastrous failure on which Voltaire passed damning judgment: «Scarcely less than one hundred thousand people were sacrificed in the two expeditions of Saint Louis» (1963: i, 599). *Zaïre* was the first French classical tragedy to show Christians and Muslims in the same play. Voltaire said his idea was to contrast «the customs of Muslims and those of Christians» (1988: 420).

It is made clear in *Zaïre* that the Christians represent Western Europe and the Muslims belong to Asia. The Muslim Sultan of Jerusalem castigates the crusaders: «I see these savage Christians thirsting for plunder, drawn from Western shores to our lands» («Je vois ces fiers chrétiens, de rapine altérés | Des bords de l'Occident vers nos bords attirés») (*Zaïre* I. 2, 183–4). During the play the sense of division between Europe and Asia is reinforced by geographical references on the one hand to France, Paris, England and Germany, and on the other hand to Syria, Damascus, and the River Jordan. Voltaire depicts the alterity and fear which divide the two continents, but he does not demonize his Muslim characters. The whole play invites Christian Europe to examine its own attitudes and conduct towards Muslims.

Orosmane, Sultan of Jerusalem, is portrayed by Voltaire as rejecting the customs associated in French minds with an orien-

tal despot. He has renounced polygamy and plans monogamous marriage. He has embraced open government instead of secrecy. In the eyes of Zaïre, he is a model of virtue: «Generous, charitable, righteous, full of virtues; if he were a Christian, what more could he be?» («Généreux, bienfaisant, juste, plein de vertus, | S'il était chrétien que serait-il de plus?») (*Zaïre* IV. 1, 1085). Voltaire implies that this list of virtues represents ethical values transcending religion and common to all humanity.

Zaïre was brought up a Muslim, having been snatched from her Christian family as an infant, and never baptized. She and the Sultan are devotedly in love with each other. On the day of her marriage she learns of her Christian origins from her long-lost father, Lusignan, and from her brother, Nérestan. When they discover she has become a Muslim, they are horrified. Later she asks her brother what are her duties as a Christian. Nerestan tells her: «Detest the rule of your [Muslim] masters; serve and love the God whom our ancestors loved» («Détester l'empire de vos maîtres, | Servir, aimer ce dieu qu'ont aimé nos ancêtres») (*Zaïre* III. 4, 795–6). Nérestan goes on to say that a Christian who marries a Muslim would deserve a speedy death (III. 4, 827). None the less, they agree that Zaïre will postpone the marriage till she is baptized. Her brother undertakes to arrange for a priest to see her. But when Zaïre asks Orosmane to delay the marriage, without giving her reasons, this excites the Sultan's jealous suspicions. Angry with Zaïre, he impulsively rejects European values regarding women: «This dangerous sex, which seeks to control everything, may rule in Europe, but here [in Palestine] they must obey» («Ce sexe dangereux, qui veut tout asservir, | S'il règne dans l'Europe, ici doit obéir») (III. 7, 1037–8).

Voltaire depicts good and bad in the characters. Nérestan's fanatical Christian principles are combined with his deep sense of honour and his total dedication to keeping his word. Orosmane has many virtues, but they are vitiated by the fatal consequences of his jealousy.

Zaïre was the most popular of all Voltaire's plays. Over thirty separate editions were published during his lifetime. It had 488 performances at the Comédie Française between 1732 and 1936,

more than Racine's *Bajazet*, a rival tragedy in the orientalising mode. *Zaïre* was translated into Italian, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, German, Spanish, Portuguese and English. The English translation by Aaron Hill was performed in London, Edinburgh, Dublin, Bath, and Bristol. Other performances took place all over Europe from Dublin to St Petersburg (Voltaire 1988: 286–292, 333–379).

A twentieth-century response to the tragedy focuses on Zaïre's dilemma when she learns that her loyalties to her Christian family conflict with her desire to marry a Muslim. «Can Zaïre betray the faith for which her family has suffered so much?» asks Jacobs, a recent editor of the play, and adds: «This is not an artificial problem, nor one unknown in modern times» (Voltaire 1988: 316). Voltaire's dramaturgical solution to the problem is full of dramatic irony. It is Nérestan's insistence on bringing a priest to have his sister baptized which results in the tragic catastrophe. Orosmane mistakenly thinks Nérestan is Zaïre's lover. The Sultan stabs his future wife to death in a jealous frenzy, then kills himself. His last words offer forgiveness to Nérestan, whose Christian fanaticism is softened by the example of the Muslim's generosity. It is on this note that Nérestan is allowed to embark at the port of Jaffa to return home, to report to Western Europe the Muslim sultan's tragic love for Zaïre.

In his next play *Alzire, ou les Américains* (1734) Voltaire looks again at Christian Europe, this time in relation to the Americas. He had run into trouble with the authorities for his *Lettres Philosophiques*, judged to be subversive and irreligious. Two of his plays, *Oedipe* and *Zaïre*, had verses which could seem disrespectful towards religion. It was prudent to show that the Christian religion had a good side as well as a bad side.

In *Alzire* Voltaire makes a single country, Spain, stand for Europe as a whole. Spanish atrocities in Peru bring all Europe into disrepute. The Indians reject dissimulation as a *European* art (I. 5, 305–9), and complain they have lost their freedom and are now subjects of *European* masters (III. 5, 193). The Spaniards object to human sacrifice and idolatry practised by the American Indians (I. 1, 63–4). This implies a contrast between Europe, which has rejected these

practices, and America, which has not. But the main thrust of the play is an attack on the cruel colonial regime. Alvarez reproaches his son, now governor of Peru, with a policy of treating the Indians as savages who must be punished and enslaved. Such policies, he says, have made both Europe and Christianity abhorrent: «From Eastern shores have I come to a world of idolatry, a land unknown to Europe, only to find that under these burning tropics the names of both Europe and Catholic are abhorred!» («Des bords de l'Orient, n'étais-je donc venu | Dans un monde idolâtre, à l'Europe inconnu, | Que pour voir abhorrer sous ce brûlant tropique | Et le nom de l'Europe, et le nom catholique !») (*Alzire* I, 1, 71–4).

But there is a good side to Christianity, which the Indians perceive as a European religion. Voltaire proclaims this in the *Discours préliminaire* to *Alzire*: «The religion of the true Christian is to regard all men as his brothers, to do good to them, and to forgive their wrongs» (1989: 117–118). This prepares for a surprise in the last moments of the play. Gusman, the young Christian governor, sees the error of his cruel policies. He forgives the Indian who has wronged him. It is this act of forgiveness which causes the subject peoples to accept Christianity as a true religion brought to them by the Europeans. His father Alvarez sees the hand of God in his son's change of heart.

Many arguments in favour of burning a young widow alive are to be found in the first two acts of *La Veuve du Malabar* (1770) by Antoine-Marin Lemierre, a disciple of Voltaire. This French classical tragedy examines the Hindu tradition of sati, which required widows to commit suicide on the funeral pyre of their dead husband. It shows a confrontation between Indian and European customs. Not surprisingly, the play comes out against Hindu sati. It seems a simple case of European Enlightenment prevailing over Indian barbarism. But the way Lemierre promotes European values is problematic.

Throughout the play Lanassa, the Hindu widow, is determined to follow tradition by climbing on to her dead husband's funeral pyre to be consumed by the flames. European values are represented by the French army officers who oppose sati. The Indians

view the French as representatives of Europe as a whole, and they frequently refer to them as *Européens*. For example, the Brahmin high priest complains: «These proud Europeans have breathed the poison of their cowardly system into our very minds» («Ces fiers Européens jusqu'en nos esprits même | Ont soufflé le poison de leur lâche système») (IV. 2, 1011–12).

The plot unfolds with love affairs and recognition of long-lost kin. The prospect of seeing the heroine cast herself into the flames of the funeral pyre, visible on stage, keeps the audience on the edge of their seats till the last moment. Finally, the French general forbids the act. European values are shown to be superior, but not in the name of Christianity. Lemierre, through the mouth of the French General, attributes the values which finally triumph to Louis XV, King of France: «Whilst others bring cruelty, arrogance and violence to the vanquished, he [King Louis] brings humanity» («D'autres chez les vaincus portent la cruauté, | L'orgueil, la violence; et lui, l'humanité») (IV. 6, 1441–2). There is, however, no suggestion that the virtue of humanity and all that it implies —compassion, pity, benevolence— has anything to do with Louis XV being «the very Christian king», the traditional title of the King of France. *Humanité* is presented as a virtue without reference to religion, and as an ethical attitude which is characteristically French and European. The implication is that it is, or ought to be, a universal value.

In the context of his tragedy, Lemierre seems to make a good case for exporting European values. Compassion and humanity are presented in a positive light, bringing to an end the burning alive of widows, perceived by Europeans as a barbaric custom. But Frédéric Tinguely's twenty-first-century reading of the play points to problems in the way Lemierre has brought about his dénouement. Tinguely starts from the premise that the custom of sati is of such radical alterity in the eyes of westerners («relève d'une altérité radicale»), that it constitutes an exceptional case for exploring cultural relativity (2006: 450). He suggests that, by equating French identity with the universal values of humanity and compassion, Lemierre seems to be legitimating French domination over all that is not French: «Lemierre opens the way for a western

imperialism without apparent limits. Either he is betraying the Enlightenment project, or he is crudely revealing its inevitable implications: in either case he is raising issues which are today still of great relevance» (2006: 461). The issues referred to seem to be that, if compassion and humanity are held to be universal values of which Europeans are privileged custodians, then peoples outside Europe may have much to fear from the manner in which Europeans attempt to impose these values upon them.

European issues are raised explicitly in *Zaïre*, *Alzire* and *La Veuve du Malabar*. They are raised in quite different ways by Voltaire's *Mahomet*, which was controversial in performance in its own time, and remains so in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Voltaire's Mahomet

Religious fanaticism both appalled and fascinated Voltaire. After depicting it in various works including *Zaïre*, he decided to treat it in a new way in a new tragedy. Voltaire looked back to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries for notorious examples of fanaticism, namely the assassination of two kings of France by Roman Catholics in the heart of Europe, allegedly with the connivance of the Roman Catholic church. But how was Voltaire to express his detestation of this kind of religious violence without running into trouble with the Roman Catholic authorities of France? He decided to transfer the theme from Europe to the soil of Arabia and to clothe the Pope in the robes of an Arab prophet. The result was *Le Fanatisme, ou Mahomet le prophète* (1741). In a letter to King Frederick II of Prussia, which he published as an introduction to his play, Voltaire summarized the plot as follows:

> A young man of virtuous disposition is led astray by his fanaticism, and assassinates an old man who loves him. Believing he is serving God, he unwittingly makes himself a parricide. He is ordered to do this by an imposter, who promises the assassin an incestuous marriage as a reward. (Voltaire 2002: 150)

In this same letter Voltaire gives specific examples of assassinations for religious reasons, all within Europe, and all well known. Five occurred in France; others in Italy, Germany, England and the Netherlands. He admits that Muhammad never planned an assassination such as he depicts in the play, but he deems it plausible that, since the Prophet took up arms against his native city, he would have been capable of such a crime. Voltaire has created a fictional picture of the Prophet Muhammad and attributed to him the hypocrisy, political ambitions and criminal tendencies which he associated with the Christian church.[1] The letter to Frederick II, set alongside the text of the play, encourages an oscillation of perspective according to whether the reader or spectator sees the action as relevant to Europe or to the Middle East.

The play depicts the Prophet's triumphant return to Mecca at the head of his army in 630AD, having secured his hold over the Meccans by having their leader assassinated, and by engineering a spurious miracle to show that God is on his side. The assassination and spurious miracle are entirely Voltaire's invention.

After five successful performances in Lille in spring 1741, *Mahomet* started its run in Paris in August 1742. It was stopped after three performances because the authorities saw the play as an attack on the Christian church. But Voltaire could also present the play as an attack on Islam. In this spirit he dedicated *Mahomet* to Pope Benedict XIV. It was a clever way for Voltaire to silence his Christian critics. He compounded his subterfuge by publishing a letter from the Pope which he doctored to make it appear that the Pope approved of his play (Voltaire 2002: 159). Even so, it was not till 1751 that the Comédie Française started to perform *Mahomet* regularly.

Fanaticism in the play is not as simple as it seems, nor is the plot quite as Voltaire describes it in his letter to Frederick II. Séide is the credulous youth whom Mahomet persuades to assassinate Zopire, leader of the anti-Muslims in Mecca. Ostensibly Séide is the type

1 To avoid confusion, «Muhammad» here refers to the historical person, whilst «Mahomet» refers to the fictional character in Voltaire's play.

of young fanatic whom Voltaire has in mind when he talks about Jacques Clément and Ravaillac, the assassins of two kings of France, or about similar fanatics in other European countries. But Séide spends much more of the play hesitating about the murder than he does in exemplifying fanaticism. Moreover, he repents of the murder almost as soon as he has committed it. He is quite different from the eponymous hero of Corneille's *Polyeucte* or Voltaire's own Nérestan in *Zaïre*. These fanatics are intransigent in their religious beliefs. Séide is not. His hesitations provide the mainspring of a powerful scene which explores the psychology of a young Muslim being persuaded to carry out a murderous mission.

At the centre of the play Mahomet uses religious arguments to persuade a hesitant Séide to assassinate Zopire, the enemy of the Muslims: the holy city of Mecca must be captured; the youth should heed the example of Abraham who showed total obedience to God by being willing to sacrifice his son; if Séide does not obey, he is an unworthy Muslim and an infidel. Séide falls at Mahomet's feet exclaiming: «I believe I hear God; you speak; I obey») («Je crois entendre Dieu; tu parles; j'obéis») (*Mahomet*, III. 7, 886).

When Séide later realizes that the old man he has killed is his father and that he has been tricked into parricide, he explains to his dying father how this came about. It is the key issue of the play. He was inspired by the best of motives —patriotism, religion, loyalty to family— but was led astray by unquestioning obedience to his religious leader (*Mahomet*, IV. 6, 1243–6).

Voltaire's Mahomet appears not to believe in the religion he preaches to others. This apparent hypocrisy gives the play its disturbing political dimension. «Politics are treated at least as badly in the play as religion» wrote the Abbé Le Blanc in 1742 (Voltaire 2002: 24). This political dimension is taken up in reactions to the play in various European contexts. Voltaire's Mahomet is a consummate politician who preys on the fears of his gullible followers, and uses deceit to control the masses.

Mahomet was speedily translated into many languages: Danish, Dutch, English, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Swedish and Spanish (Voltaire 2002:

123–33). Widely read and performed, it provoked reactions which bear witness to recurrent fears in Europe. The English adaptation by James Miller was advertised in 1744 as exposing the ambitions of France «the common enemy of Europe» who had lately attempted «to establish a Civil and Spiritual tyranny» (Scouten 1966: 1104).

By 1950, Voltaire's Mahomet is seen as an image of Hitler: «Religious fervour [...] is denounced especially in *Mahomet*, where a budding dictator is able to make use of religious fervour for his own purposes, much as Hitler could turn to his own temporary advantage the patriotism of his followers» (Lancaster 1950: ii, 612). By the year 2000 the situation had taken a new turn. Back in 1751 Voltaire had written to his niece: «Really it's only Muslims who have cause for complaint, for I have made Mahomet a bit more wicked (*méchant*) than he was» (Voltaire 1964: iii, 499). As Voltaire viewed Muslims as marginal to European society, he showed little concern for their views. He could not have foreseen the changes three hundred years after his birth when, during the post-war period, the Muslim population of western Europe has increased substantially, though McCormick points out that «Muslims make up only about three per cent of the population of Europe» (2010: 172).

The recent controversy surrounding the staging of Voltaire's *Mahomet* highlights the themes examined so far. To celebrate the tercentenary of Voltaire's birth, Hervé Loichemol proposed a public reading of Voltaire's *Mahomet* in Geneva where Voltaire had lived. Muslims protested. Tariq Ramadan wrote an open letter to Loichemol (dated 7 October 1993) asking him to abandon the project out of respect for Muslim religious beliefs, and made his case as follows:

> The Muslim community in Europe is living through difficult times. The focus in the media on integration and fanaticism makes every Muslim suspect. The war in Bosnia is as hard to bear as the gaze of people who in daily life think so badly of you. [...] This image of Mahomet as bloodthirsty, intransigent, jealous, hypocritical and fanatical, and as a false prophet [...] strikes with violence into the hearts and consciences of *Muslims who are a part of Europe today* [my emphasis]; it will be one

> more stone in the edifice of hatred and rejection in which Muslims feel they are being trapped. (Ramadan 1993)

The fear is evident. The threat was real. Muslims were being killed in Bosnia in 1993, and two years later there was a massacre of Muslims in Srebrenica. In an interview about Bosnia conducted fifteen years later, Ramadan elaborates on these fears. If Europeans allowed the massacres of Muslims to happen in Bosnia which, in his view, is situated in the heart of Europe, is there anywhere in Europe where Muslims can feel safe? He likens the Muslim predicament to that of the Jews of Europe under Hitler (Ramadan 2010).

In 1993 the proposed reading in Geneva did not take place because funding was refused. Analyzing the issues ten years later, Pierre Frantz expresses regret: «It was absolutely essential [...] to open a discussion on the position of intellectuals and westerners vis-à-vis Islam and revealed religions. [...] It could only have been done by staging the play, and placing confidence in a director who deserved some credit. Courage was lacking» (2003: 158).

About eight years after the cancellation of *Mahomet* in Geneva, Christopher Todd remarked: «In the present day the cult of political correctness makes it difficult to imagine a modern staging» (Voltaire 2002: 32). However, Voltaire's *Mahomet* was performed regularly at the Théâtre du Nord-Ouest in Paris in the first half of 2002 (Theatreonline 2002). This was only a few months after the attack on the World Trade Centre in Manhattan by a group of Muslim fundamentalists, an event to which Jacob in his account of the play draws attention as the context in which the *Mahomet* of 2002, directed by Jean-Luc Jeener, was performed. It was staged without scenery except for a symbolic knife hanging from a pillar, and with «the actors moving amongst the spectators» (Jacob 2006: 167). These performances apparently took place «without the slightest problem» («sans l'ombre d'un problème») (Loichemol 2006: 8).

In December 2005 Hervé Loichemol again proposed public readings of Voltaire's *Mahomet*. Here is how the matter was reported in the *Wall Street Journal*:

> The production quickly stirred up passions that echoed the [Danish] cartoon uproar. «This play … constitutes an insult to the entire Muslim community», said a letter to the mayor of Saint-Genis-Pouilly, signed by Said Akhrouf, a French-born café owner of Moroccan descent and three other Islamic activists representing Muslim associations. They demanded the performance be cancelled. Instead, Mayor Hubert Bertrand called in police reinforcements to protect the theater. On the night of the December reading [2005], a small riot broke out involving several dozen people and youths who set fire to a car and garbage cans. It was «the most excitement we've ever had down here», says the socialist mayor. (Higgins 2006)

A similar account, with documentation from local newspapers of the time, is given by Jacob (2006: 166).

Two months later Loichemol, in an article in *Le Monde*, expressed his satisfaction that his public reading of *Mahomet* had taken place in 2005, and reflected on his failure to secure funding for it back in 1993. He interpreted Ramadan's request for respect for religious sensitivities as a kind of censorship: «Henceforth freedom of expression must be limited by the precise and well known categories of what is respectful, sensitive and reasonable» (2006: 8). Loichemol goes on to assert that theatres should be

> places where Abraham, Jesus or Muhammad are worth no more than Hamlet, Robespierre or Tartuffe; where they are no longer the property of religions; where religions are simply a moment in the history of humanity. Places therefore where religions no longer have any right or means to impose their control. It is against this inexorable expropriation that the censors are going into action. (2006: 11)

Loichemol's article does not argue that *Mahomet* deserves to be performed because of its theatrical qualities nor does he mention Voltaire's didactic purpose in promoting critical awareness and rational enquiry to take the place of blind obedience to authority. He confines himself to expressing fear that freedom of speech is under threat from religious censorship.

A week later, Tariq Ramadan made a robust response, reaffirming what he had written to Loichemol in 1993:

> I am the first to be with you in defending freedom of conscience and expression, but my daily life has taught me that my «right to express» must be tempered with precaution when it encounters the intimate feelings (French: *affections*) of others, or the living dimension which it accords to the sacred. (Ramadan 2006)

He also states:

> At that time [1993] I was teaching Voltaire —including his play *Mahomet*— and dozens of schoolchildren can confirm this. So, no censorship or fatwa against Voltaire, who should be read, studied and performed. (Ramadan 2006)

Ramadan also explains that he had offered Loichemol a way out of the polarized confrontations by inviting him «to explain his intentions in an educational manner (*par pédagogie*) so that Muslims would be able to take a detached critical attitude (*prendre une distance critique*) if the play were to be performed» (2006).

It is noteworthy that a leading Muslim scholar recommends that Voltaire's works, including *Mahomet*, should be studied and performed. Moreover, in pursuing his educational theme, Ramadan urges Loichemol to take a lesson from Voltaire himself «who repeated again and again that one must have the modesty to doubt oneself, and the strength to listen to others» (2006).

Tariq Ramadan, in his open letter to Loichemol of 1993 and in his interview of 2010 quoted above, explicitly gives the controversy a European perspective by referring to the threats to Bosnian Muslims said to be «in the heart of Europe» and by his allusions to the Holocaust. Whether his adversary, Loichemol, saw the controversy as a European matter cannot be unequivocally demonstrated from the actual words of his article, since his tone is predominantly ironic and allusive. However, a strong impression emerges that the theatrical director viewed the conflict as one between religious censorship as alien to Europe, and freedom of expression as characteristic of Europe. This controversy demonstrates that Voltaire's

French classical tragedy still has the power to generate passionate debate on European issues two and a half centuries after it was first performed.

Conclusion

The Muslim alterity of the Ottoman Empire was made a source of comedy by Molière, but for Racine it was a subject of sober research and thoughtful representation. The plays of Desmarets, Voltaire and Lemierre examined here, and responses to them in our own times, prompt reflection on two recurrent themes in European history: firstly, the fear that one part of Europe, one religion, or one ideology, should exercise hegemonic control over the rest of Europe; secondly, European aspirations to eliminate radical forms of alterity when encountered in other continents.

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